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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BANGKOK 001817

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/MLS, NSC FOR BADER

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TAGS: PREL PGOV TH

SUBJECT: THAILAND: AMBASSADOR MEETS WITH RED-SHIRT LEADERS
TO ENCOURAGE POLITICAL DIALOGUE AND RECONCILIATION

REF: A. BANGKOK 00974 (BANGKOK CALM)

1B. BANGKOK 01157 (LOOKING FOR A WAY OUT OF THE
POLITICAL IMPASSE)

BANGKOK 00001817 001.2 OF 003

Classified By: Ambassador Eric G. John, reason 1.4 (b,d)

Summary and comment:

11. (C) The Ambassador on July 17, as part of an on-going embassy effort, met with a group of core United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) red-shirt activists to encourage domestic political dialogue, assess their plans surrounding the July ASEAN and ARF meetings in Phuket, and to ask about the direction of their movement. The Ambassador told them that the U.S. would not take sides in Thailand's political debate; we support the peaceful expression of political differences, but speak out when the rule of law or democracy are threatened. The group assured the Ambassador that there would be no demonstrations at the ASEAN and ARF meetings; they claimed convincingly that that their April demonstrations that derailed the ASEAN plus three summit in Pattaya got out of hand due to the government's unwillingness to provide security to the UDD protesters. The red-shirt leaders claimed they were fighting for justice and democracy in Thailand, and that the UDD was gaining strength daily. Finally, they suggested amending the constitution was central to bridging Thailand's political divide.

12. (C) Comment: The Ambassador convened this meeting as part of the Embassy's consistent ongoing effort over the past year to encourage opposing political forces and parties in Thailand to use dialogue, rather than force, as the principle means of political reconciliation. For its part, the UDD used the extremely cordial meeting in part as an effort to rehabilitate the thuggish image the UDD gained after the violence that marred the April Songkran demonstrations. We disagree with the UDD assertion that the Royal Thai Government (RTG) bears responsibility for the April violence; the responsibility for the chaos clearly belongs to the UDD, which has never forsaken violence as an option. The night prior to the session with the Ambassador, a red-shirt crowd had battled Chiang Mai police in the streets after a regional red-shirt leader was arrested at the Chiang Mai airport with a gun and ammunition during a visit of the Minister of

Finance. In the end, the Phuket meetings occurred without a whiff of violence, but the RTG took no chances, deploying a total of 10,000 security personnel to keep the venues secure and the tourist island destination in partial lockdown mode.

End summary and comment.

Engaging the Red-shirts

¶ 13. (C) On July 17, the Ambassador invited to the Residence core United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) leaders Veera Musikapong, Jaran Ditapichai, and Weng Tojirakarn, as well as UDD deputy international coordinator Sean Boonprakong, to encourage dialogue, discuss the future of the red-shirt movement, UDD plans and intentions for the pending ARF meetings in Phuket, and the U.S. response to tactics used by both the UDD and the PAD in demonstrations over the past year. The Ambassador emphasized that the U.S. engaged interested parties on both sides of Thailand's political divide and took no sides in the domestic political debate as long as democracy and the rule of law were not threatened.

No red Shirts in Phuket (unlike Pattaya, Bangkok)

¶ 14. (C) Veera Musikapong, a founder of the UDD movement, was the primary speaker in the group. He told the Ambassador that the red-shirts would not attempt to disrupt the ASEAN and ARF meetings in Phuket. He claimed the UDD was reaching out to the international community because the UDD actually supported international meetings, and that the April riots had muddled its message. Veera claimed the UDD had not planned to disrupt the ASEAN plus three meeting in Pattaya in

BANGKOK 00001817 002.2 OF 003

mid-April; they had merely intended to deliver a letter regarding the illegitimate nature of the Abhisit government.

¶ 15. (C) The factor precipitating violence on April 11, according to Veera, was the attack by a group of government supporters wearing blue shirts on red-shirt protesters; once the government failed to intervene to protect the reds, the UDD then sent more red-shirts to Pattaya for increased security. (Note: "blue shirts" refers to a group of government supporters affiliated with the Bhumjaithai party and banned politician Newin Chidchop. According to press reports, the blue shirts had several confrontations with the reds during the April protests in Pattaya but did not play a decisive role. The Pattaya violence actually started four days prior, when a red mob attacked PM Abhisit's car and attempted to drag him from the vehicle.)

¶ 16. (C) The UDD also unconvincingly claimed that the primary reason the demonstrations in Bangkok had turned violent the subsequent day, April 12, was the response by security forces. They claimed the army's actions in suppressing the riots (on April 13) were excessive, and accused security forces of firing on the unarmed protesters. Weng Tojirakarn, a medical doctor, recounted how treated a wound he that he claimed was made by an M16 round. (Note: The army intervened April 13 a day after one red mob again attacked the PM's motorcade, trapping/injuring a key aide, and another red mob killed two Bangkok civilians attempting to protect their street from the chaos of the red demonstrations).

UDD goals: "real democracy" and "real justice"

¶ 17. (C) The UDD leaders expressed appreciation for the Ambassador's invitation to meet, as well as for the availability of other Embassy officers over the past many months to discuss the red-shirts' political concerns. The UDD leaders told the Ambassador that they understood why the U.S. had condemned the April violence, and that they wanted to open an internal channel to the U.S. government to

communicate and tell their side of the story. They described the current state of governance in Thailand as "a mess" created by the 2006 coup makers, and that the UDD's message over the three months since the April demonstrations had gotten muddled. The UDD's goal, they said, was to establish "real democracy" and "real justice" in Thailand. They claimed PM Abhisit had not been clear about what had transpired in Bangkok and Pattaya in April. The government's handling of the UDD demonstrations was emblematic of the way democracy in Thailand was being subverted, the reason why the red-shirts could not give up. The UDD was transforming into a large movement that was growing stronger each day, they claimed; "We want you to understand that this is a metamorphosis; we cannot be called a street protest anymore."

¶8. (C) The UDD also was fighting for justice, according to Veera, in a country with double standards and no due process.

Former PM Thaksin's legal troubles were evidence of this double standard, he claimed, as was the way UDD leaders had been treated in the wake of the April protests. Veera asserted that over 100 UDD leaders were charged with crimes immediately after the Pattaya and Bangkok riots, while the first summons for PAD leaders to appear before police for the airport seizures had just been issued - some seven months after the incident. If a UDD leader even appeared on stage to give speech, he said, they would be arrested, Veera said. Thais were aware of this double standard and were tired of it; they wanted real justice. (Note: in fact, the PAD leaders were all arrested/released on bail several months prior to the airport takeover, in connection with the August takeover of Government House. UDD leaders are able to give speeches, but the terms of their bail include a ban on overt political agitation.)

¶9. (C) When asked about fugitive ex-PM Thaksin's role in the red movement, Veera said only that Thaksin was a friend and UDD supporter. Veera described the effort to gather signatures to petition the palace for a royal pardon for the former PM, but would only submit a petition if they gathered

BANGKOK 00001817 003.2 OF 003

over one million. If Thaksin were to return to Thailand, he could do as he pleased, Veera said.

Reiterating U.S. policy

¶10. (C) The Ambassador expressed appreciation for their version of events surrounding the Songkran events, noting he had heard many versions from many people, and all believed their version correct. The Ambassador reiterated that it would be inappropriate for the US to take sides in the domestic political turmoil. The U.S. supported the peaceful expression of political differences, but would speak out when violent or other illegal tactics by any side threatened democracy or the rule of law. As a close friend and ally of Thailand, the U.S. felt obligated to speak out on such occasions. He reiterated our sense that both the PAD and UDD understood that their tactics spun out of control and that the leaders knew the resort to violence hurt their movements.

¶11. (C) The U.S. had taken a firm stand against the 2006 coup, had spoken out against the PAD airport seizure in December as well as the UDD April violence in Bangkok and Pattaya, the Ambassador continued. Such events clearly not only hurt Thailand's democratic system and economy, but also thereby negatively affected interests of the U.S. and international community. The U.S. was not a referee, but a responsible friend of Thailand. It was clear that Thailand faced problems on a number of fronts, including the rule of law. When appropriate, we would express our concerns to the Thai leadership, as we did after the ASEAN meeting was canceled in April.

The way forward: amend the constitution

¶12. (C) On the way ahead, the UDD leaders responded to the Ambassador's call for reconciliation and query about its prospects by asserting that reforming the constitution was central to healing rifts inside the government, and rejecting claims that the red-shirt movement was anti-royalist. Veera said the UDD was trying to work with parliament but was concerned that their suggestions were being ignored. Weng added that the UDD could agree with changes recommended by the Reconciliation Committee for Political Reform and Constitutional Amendments, the committee appointed by the Prime Minister, because the committee's position was very similar to the UDD,s, with the exception of article 309 - which granted amnesty to the 2006 coup makers. If the committee's recommendations were accepted by parliament, the UDD would be satisfied and move onto other issues. (Note: Thai press reported in July 16 that the Reconciliation Committee issued a six point proposal for amending the Thai constitution. The recommended amendments included changes to clauses relating to party dissolution, election of MPs and senators, and a provision relating to MPs holding political office.)

JOHN